



"Ribbon Cutting, from left to right: Michael Coard, Superintendent Cynthia MacLeod, Mayor Michael Nutter, Joyce Wilkerson, Clarence Armbrister, Shirley Graham"
Credit: Photo by M. Edlow for GPTMC

New Exhibit Opens at Independence NHP

President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation opened on Wednesday, December 15, after more than five years of design development, eight years of vigorous public participation, and 10 years after ground was first broken for the Liberty Bell Center in Independence National Historical Park. The commemorative, open-air installation marks the site where the nation's first two presidents, George Washington and John Adams, served their terms of office and began to shape the executive branch of government. It also marks the site where the presidents lived as well as worked, and the stories of the exhibit include the entire presidential households. The videos and panels of the exhibits showcase specifically and particularly the enslaved men and women of African descent who lived and toiled on this site. The ribbon cutting event on December 15 drew significant local and national media attention.

The design of the *President's House: Freedom and Slavery in the Making of a New Nation* echoes the house that once stood on that spot. Key to the site design is the basic framework of the house that allows visitors to walk through the first floor as it was laid out in the late 18th century. The bowed window, state dining room, and kitchen, complete with hearth, are among the elements in the recreated layout.

Narrative exhibit panels tell the story of the executive branch and provide a brief contextual history of the house and the time period, allowing visitors to make connections to familiar history. Video re-enactments provide visitors with a sense of what it may have been like to live as an enslaved person in the Washington household. The characters in the videos speak from the perspective of a person of African descent, a point of view that is often missing in the broad narrative of African American history.

A few feet from the entrance to the Liberty Bell Center sits a small glass structure that serves as a memorial to the enslaved Africans. Listing the names of the African tribes of origin for many enslaved, the space is intended as a place of solemn reflection.

“From its inception, this project has generated conversation and discovery, and we hope it will continue to do so. Benefitting from the voices of citizens and guiding legislation from the U.S. Congress and the collaboration between the City of Philadelphia and the National Park Service, the project is a welcome addition to Independence National Historical Park,” said Cynthia MacLeod, Superintendent of Independence National Historical Park. Over the course of the next year, the park will continue to develop programming to supplement the site and exhibits.

A joint initiative of the City of Philadelphia and Independence National Historical Park, the project’s funding was the result of protests from the African American community led by Michael Coard, Avenging the Ancestors Coalition and Charles Blockson, Generations Unlimited. A number of organizations including the Ad Hoc Historians had long advocated for an acknowledgment of the site of the place where the new nation shaped the executive branch of the United States government. Yet the compelling story of the presence of enslaved Africans became the driver of the funding from both the City of Philadelphia under the administration of Mayor John F. Street and the Federal government through Congressmen Robert Brady and Chakka Fattah.

Though just opened, this project has been influencing interpretation in Independence National Historical Park and tourism efforts in Philadelphia for 10 years. For example, after the initial discovery of remains of the ice house associated with the mansion, exhibits within the newly constructed Liberty Bell Center were modified to include more information about slavery in general and Washington’s slaves in particular. A 2007 archeological dig uncovered unexpected remains of the actual house. This find surprised many experts, who believed that the remains of the house had all been demolished during construction in the 19th and 20th centuries. The dig revealed new facts about the structure of the house and provided an unusual sense of authenticity to the project. Another interesting revelation occurred during project development, as Mount Vernon historians discovered documentation that showed Hercules, Washington’s chef, escaped from Mount Vernon, VA instead of Philadelphia, as had been previously thought. This project has demonstrated over and over again that history is a forever unfolding narrative.



"The President's House Site is on Independence Mall, near the Liberty Bell Center and Independence Hall"
Credit: Photo by H. Rumph Jr. for GPTMC